

The trainer as executive coach

How does executive coaching work from a coach's perspective? What makes a good executive coach? And how can trainers develop their skills in this area? **Alison Carter** provides the answers.



At the moment, executive coaching is a hot topic in management training. It sounds 'neat and cool' to be able to drop into gossip around the water cooler that you have such a coach. It makes the speaker seem important. It sounds (like Stella Artois lager) reassuringly expensive. And the business management press is regularly urging all executives to get themselves a coach or be left behind as the 'next big thing' in performance improvement rolls past.

So what is executive coaching? Training professionals are almost bound to have heard of it and many are probably acting as one from time to time. Executive coaching can be neat and cool, important and, for that matter, expensive. But it can also be a slippery thing to pin down and define. Ask a handful of people who have been involved and you'll get a handful of different answers. Some make it sound like anything from a kind of life-changing revivalist-religious experience at one extreme to a quick chat with a best friend who just happens to be paid to be that best friend. And with the demand for executive coaching continuing to rise, along with the cost of external provision being so high, these days trainers are increasingly seen as a key recruiting ground for in-house coaches in many organisations.

Executive coaching is a process that is designed to help senior executives reflect on their work in a rigorous way, with an objective helper. This reflection usually involves a coach generating feedback, then helping an executive to make use and sense of it. The objective is to support the executive in improving his (or her) performance or establishing new behaviours. In essence, executive coaching is a one-to-one action learning process. This usually combines the use of diagnostic tools to help individuals identify their own learning needs, followed by the provision of support to help those individuals plan and review progress towards making the changes they desire. Unlike more generic forms of training provision, executive coaching

should be very carefully tailored to suit the individual who is being coached, both to fit in with his (probably full) diary and to make sure that the executive and the coach get on. The other key points are that coaching is usually short term and limited in nature (unlike mentoring), action orientated (rather than being a general supportive relationship) and to date has usually been provided by a 'paid someone' who is external to the normal work environment.

So how does executive coaching work? According to published research carried out at the Institute for Employment Studies,¹ there are six main phases in the executive coaching process. These main phases are

The business management press is regularly urging all executives to **get themselves a coach or be left behind** as the 'next big thing' rolls past

illustrated in Figure 1, as seen from the coach's point of view. The diagnostic part of the process is the left-hand loop, while the learning support elements are in the bold right-hand circle.

GETTING STARTED

First, you'll need to establish a rapport with the executive in question, so that he (or she) will feel comfortable in working with you as a coach and, more importantly, will trust you. You will want to agree some confidentiality ground rules and reassure the executive about your commitment to him (or her). An effective dialogue between the coach and the coached executive is at the heart of good coaching, and this relationship-building activity can be thought of as the essential building block of good dialogue. It's just as important to remember that anything said should never go any further than the two people involved. Without trust, any coaching will be an uphill struggle or more likely a complete waste of time (see Figure 1 on the next page).

• COACHING



IDENTIFYING ISSUES

In executive coaching the individual and the individual's needs always define the agenda. Assisting the executive in identifying the 'right' issues that need addressing (or that they think want addressing) is central to the coaching process. Setting off in the wrong direction is likely ultimately to be disappointing to the executive and the organisation, so identifying the right path is critical. The role of the coach is therefore to help the executive identify what the problem or agenda actually is and set these within a wider context by reviewing other priorities, plans and issues relevant to the executive. It is likely to involve you in challenging and probing.

REACHING A SHARED UNDERSTANDING

The process of reaching a shared understanding of the agenda to be pursued often involves revisiting the issues on several occasions. This will involve adding to, subtracting from or reframing some of the original issues.

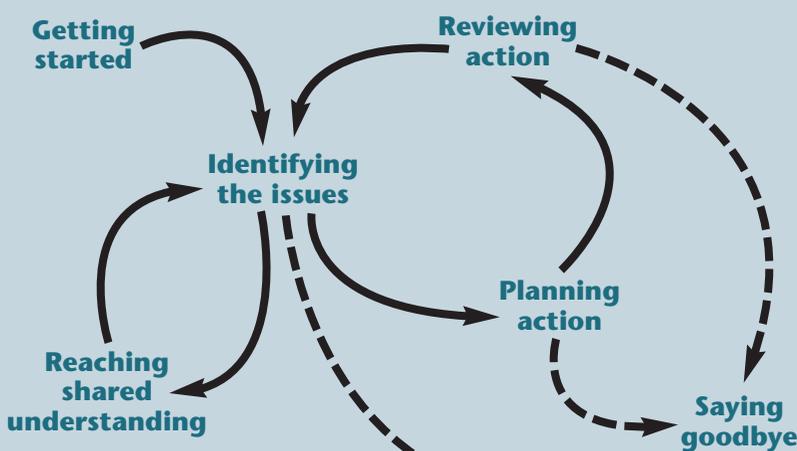
There are different ways you can help an individual to understand better what his development issues are, together with different diagnostic tools you can employ to generate the necessary feedback to give a deeper understanding of the issues. The tools you choose

Executive coaching is a process that is designed to help senior executives **reflect on their work in a rigorous way**, with an objective helper

depend on your judgement of likely issues, together with the particular techniques in which you are trained. Most coaches give consideration to the three main aspects shown below:

- personal effectiveness – psychometric tests, personality type indicators, learning styles and/or 360-degree feedback to raise self-awareness
- business and job requirements – audits against company competencies, organisation objectives and/or performance measures, and
- career and personal aspirations – work/life balance inventories and/or career driver type questionnaires.

Figure 1: The executive coaching process



Source: Adapted from Carter, 2001.

PLANNING ACTION

Once you and the executive have reached a shared understanding in the previous phase, you can move on to consider what would be a successful outcome. 'Successful outcome' means identifying the changes to be made and the actions needed to carry out those changes.

The list of needs, changes and actions can be seen as similar to a personal development plan. This involves you in giving thought to the opportunities available to the individual, as well as weighing these against the preferences of the individual and his attitude towards risk taking. Some actions may not be entirely to the executive's taste; after all, they may address what are sensitive issues for them. You will need to encourage the executive to practise new behaviours or new ways of doing things and it may help him or her to rehearse potential future scenarios with you (role-playing).

REVIEWING ACTION

While the executive is engaged in 'trying out' new behaviours, your role as a coach is all about enhancing the learning from these activities. This can be undertaken through a structured review of the experiment's outcome. This again can lead to changing the issues to be addressed. Most coaches expect to go around this circular part of the process many times on an executive's most difficult issues, and perhaps just once on his other issues.

SAYING GOODBYE

In coaching there are a number of points in the process when you can withdraw as a coach and leave the executive to get back to his (hopefully) improved working life. Ideally this is when 'closure' is mutually agreed (both sides are comfortable with what has been achieved). The executive should have the personal resources and 'drive' to continue improving on his own without further one-to-one coaching. The coach should be able to recognise that the executive can now manage his own learning.

One of the interesting things about executive coaching is that set timetables just don't work. With other forms of self-managed learning, such as e-learning programmes or action learning sets, you can make at least rough estimates about the likely amount of input time required (no matter over what elapsed period) or the elapsed period of time the arrangements will last (no matter how many set meetings actually take place). In my experience there is no average time for executive coaching relationships. Executives work at their own pace. For some a couple of sessions may be all they need to refocus or re-energise themselves, for others up to a year may be required. As a trainer-coach of executives, this means you have to be able to cope with fluidly managing your diary.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD COACH?

So if executive coaching is primarily a learning process, why aren't more trainers acting as executive coaches? What makes a good coach of executives?

In my experience good coaches for executives are where you find them. They don't have to be external to an organisation, especially in large or decentralised ones. Internal coaches can be just as good, providing

they have the right skills, can act in a completely confidential fashion about the coaching process and don't have the same 'blind spots' about their organisation as the executive being coached. Suitably skilled trainers within an organisation acting as executive coaches can also be a huge cost saving. With fees for external executive coaches running at anything up to £2,000 a day (pro rata), the business case for staying inside to 'hire' shouldn't be a hard sell. Research carried out by IES in 2001² has shown that the make up necessary to be regarded by executives as a really good coach is:

- personal credibility, and this can't be emphasised too highly
- ability to give feedback to individuals and assist them in using this feedback constructively
- core skills in observation, active listening, probing questioning, summarising and explaining
- a trained user of a range of diagnostic tools
- understanding of training needs analysis at the individual level
- knowledge of training delivery methods, particularly those that integrate learning and day-to-day work
- detachment from the immediate work environment
- respect for confidentiality of an individual's data, process and opinions
- broad understanding of the way in which organisations work and the different ways in practice that things get done
- broad understanding of the context, management pressures and dilemmas that executives at different levels have to face
- alertness to the 'clues' of organisation culture, and dynamics around power, politics and accountability, and
- chemistry or 'fit' with particular executive being coached.

From an in-house trainer's point of view, acquiring personal credibility is perhaps the most tricky item on the list. Credibility can be, by its very nature, a perishable commodity, hard to gain and easily lost. For many, executive coaches with credibility get it in a been-there-done-it-got-the-t-shirt fashion. They have already been through the system, 'won' and emerged into what is termed a 'post-heroic' phase, where they have proved themselves experts. This expertise can be in management or a specific field (such as marketing or finance), but can be the key to credibility in the eyes of some coached executives. And certainly I have come across former executives and specialists who operate effectively as executive coaches.

However, credibility can also come through personal success and recommendation as a coach. Other commentators like Shari Cauldron³ argue, as I do, that it is not as important for a coach to know the particular field as it is for the coach to understand how business (in the broadest sense) works, and have the ability to coach the executive sensitively towards his goals.

Good coaches can come from a variety of backgrounds. Some are occupational psychologists, career counsellors or consultants, others are former general managers, and then there are trainers with

years of experience developing individuals to draw on. So how can trainers develop their skills in this area? If you do not already have them, developing the core skills around observation, active listening, probing questioning, summarising and explaining are critical. Undertaking formal training and practice in a range of diagnostic tools is also essential. There are a number of organisations who offer programmes and qualifications for aspiring executive coaches. These include the Industrial Society's School of Coaching,⁴ and The Oxford School of Coaching and Mentoring.⁵

Some commercial providers of executive coaching also offer week-long intensive training programmes, such as Management Futures.⁶ Perhaps the most useful experience of all, for trainers who do not have a line management background, is to spend some time with executives in your own organisation. If a

If executive coaching is primarily a learning process, why aren't more trainers acting as executive coaches?

secondment into a management role is not possible, why not ask your chief executive if you can shadow him/her for a week?

You could also check the Internet – a search on yahoo.com or similar will provide plenty of starting points – but remember that many of the websites you come across will be US-based and most of their content is primarily about selling the services of the coach producing the website! That said, there are lots of useful nuggets tucked away among the marketing spin.

Getting started is the hardest part of executive coaching, but the key is having the confidence that, together, you and the executive you are coaching can carry the matter to a successful conclusion. At the end of the day, any coach is only as good as the last person he or she has coached. Any coach is bound to make mistakes, but getting the basics right and learning from mistakes are great ways to start the process and keep it going. 

Alison can be contacted at (tel) 01273 873673, (e-mail) alison.carter@employment-studies.co.uk or visit (website) www.employment-studies.co.uk

Reader enquiry 340

References

1. Alison Carter, *Executive Coaching: Inspiring Performance at Work*, Institute of Employment Studies, UK, June 2001.
2. This research has not yet been published. It should be available in spring 2002. For further information visit (website) www.employment-studies.co.uk
3. Shari Cauldron, 'Hire a Coach?', *Industry Week*, vol. 245, US, October 1996.
4. Industrial Society's School of Coaching; for further information contact (tel) 020 7479 2203 or visit (website) www.indsoc.co.uk
5. The Oxford School of Coaching and Mentoring; for further information contact (tel) 01865 481442 or visit (website) www.oscm.co.uk
6. Management Futures; for further information contact (tel) 020 7242 9099 or visit (website) www.managementfutures.co.uk